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How to Talk to Strangers: Beijing's Advice

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After her recent publication of the piece, "China Expands Its Courtesy: Saying 'Hello' to Strangers," in the May 2008 issue of the Journal of Asian Studies*, we asked Mary Erbaugh if she might consider writing a short related piece for us. Herewith, her advice on greetings for those currently in Beijing– and we urge you to track down a copy of the current JAS issue and read the longer piece as well.*

By Mary S. Erbaugh

US parents warn their children, "Don't talk to strangers!" But Chinese adults traditionally avoid even superficial greetings to strangers. This preserves a distinction between insiders and outsiders (*nei wai you bie*) which honors insiders but deflects con artists and unwelcome requests. People remain wary until they know someone's title, surname, and background through networks of connections (*guanxi*) with kin, classmates, and colleagues. People do not say "hello" even to neighbors on the street. In stores, restaurants, train stations, taxis, post offices or clinics, customers request service without pleasantries: "Pork chop noodles!," "To the east bus station!" Good service focuses on a quick but silent response. Strangers remain lonely and vulnerable to rudeness, as any Chinese bus rider knows.

Mandarin classes and phrasebooks for foreigners stress phrases which are supposed to be equivalents to English "hello," "please," "sorry," "thanks" and "good-bye." But surprisingly, such phrases are not universal. The Mandarin versions turn out to be very recent, unfamiliar translations from European languages. Using them can sound as awkward, conversation-stopping, and potentially sarcastic as saying *bon jour* in a Mississippi gas station.

Yet the Beijing government has launched the biggest propaganda campaign since the Cultural Revolution to press people to use exactly these "five courteous phrases" (*wuge limao de ci*): "hello" (*nin hao*), "please" (*qing*) "sorry" (*duibuqi*), "thanks" (*xiexie*) and "goodbye" (*zai jian*). This deliberately innocuous effort repudiates the painful political labels of the Cultural Revolution in hopes of a public sphere that is depoliticized, harmonious, hygienically free of trash, spitting, and public urination, and internationally recognized as a world-class "civilization' (*wenming limao*). (For details, see Erbaugh 2008). In the propaganda poster in Illustration 1, even zoo monkeys urge garbage-

throwing visitors, "Could you please act more civilized!"

The shift toward using the five courteous phrases fills a historically recent gap in greeting foreign visitors. But the phrases are beginning to catch on locally to bridge a gap in Chinese social relations. Hundreds of millions of Chinese have suddenly found themselves as strangers in new factories and high-rise neighborhoods where 40 percent of people surveyed don't know the names of their neighbors. Self-help best sellers, arguing that talking to strangers can be good business, coach readers on how to use the phrases. Illustration 2 shows readers how to say an honorific "hello" (*nin hao*) to someone they know.

Adding the phrases onto traditional insider courtesy is a slow process, especially outside the metropolis. Each phrase carries problematic historic overtones. English "hello" or "hi," translated as *nin hao*, sounds closer to "Greetings to the honored people," adapted from ceremonial group greetings, e.g. leaders reviewing the troops from Tian'anmen Square or students greeting their teachers. "Please" (*qing*) is a verb, traditionally restricted to superior making an offer to an inferior, "might I invite you to do X." Customers who say qing sound contradictory. Service workers are reluctant to say it, for it risks both cheekiness and assuming responsibility for situations which are often out of their control, e.g. running out of stock.

"Sorry," translated as *duibuqi*, is literally "I cannot rise to face you," closer to "I beg you to forgive me. How can I make it up to you?" It takes responsibility for serious wrong doing which demands reparations. For minor lapses, people often say "[I'm] embarrassed" (*bu hao yisi*) or borrow the widely understood Cantonese phrase for "[I] shouldn't / sorry / excuse me / please / thanks" (*m goi*). In the US people say "sorry" or "excuse me" to request attention. In Mandarin, "may I ask…" (*qing wen*) is often less confusing. "Thank you," translated as *xiexie*, comes from "[I] refuse [it]," and the necessity to refuse any offer three times. Waiters and clerks find it confusing. "Goodbye," translated as *zai jian*, sounds more like "farewell" or even *bon voyage*, to people you never expect to see again. Family, friends and colleagues do not tempt fate by saying it; they simply say "[I'm] leaving" (*zou le*).

What are you supposed to say instead of the five phrases? The title ("teacher," "manager," even a fictive kinship title like "grandpa"), plus surname, plus a situational comment: "Have you eaten?," "You must be busy," "Where are you going?" US visitors often feel their privacy has been invaded, but respond literally: "Well, I had breakfast rather late" or "I'm going to my friend Lee's house." But situational comments are usually merely *pro forma* efforts to establish a connection. Only a vague response is needed: "I've eaten," "Very busy," "Going out." The less people have seen foreigners, the more curious they are. Decades ago as a student in Taipei, passers-by exhausted me by yelling, "Foreigner!" "How old are you?" "Are you married?" "How many children do you have?" "Where do you live?" "What did you pay for those socks?" A recent propaganda poster in the Beijing neighborhood near Tian'anmen Square lists "Eight 'Don't Ask' Topics for Foreigners": age, marital status, occupation, income, health status, as well as politics or religion.

Chinese do ask each other specific questions both from curiosity and to establish common ground when they are first introduced, especially hometown, school, and employer. Even the politest Chinese try to establish a connection with questions that US visitors may react to as annoying or clichéd:

"What country are you from?" "How long have you been in China?" "Can you use chopsticks?" "What do you think of China?" China values the right phrase for each situation. Americans can grow impatient when a Chinese says "I'm happy to be in… the Big Apple / the Windy City / Nanjing, one of China's 'three furnaces' of hot weather / Hangzhou by the beautiful West Lake / at the Hai'er Company, China's biggest maker of home appliances." But to Chinese ears, conventional comments show sensitivity to where you are and what to say. Americans relish political debate. But Chinese are unlikely to exhort Americans to close Guantanamo, free Puerto Rico, or pay reparations for African-American slavery. Ironically, Olympic sports talk offers situational comments with a very simple vocabulary: team names, nationalities, scores, and good wishes.

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Illustration 1 Credit:

于保勋。'招我急哪？' 中央文明办秘书组和中国科普作家协会。2003。*改陋习，讲文明*。北京：华夏出版社。第23页。

Yu Baoxun. 'Are you trying to make me mad?' In Zhongyang Wenming Ban Mishu Zu and Zhongguo Kepu Zuojia Xiehui {Central Secretariat for Civilized Behavior and Chinese Writers' Committee for Popularizing Science}. 2003. *Gai chou xi, jiang wenming* (*Change Ugly Customs, Emphasize Cultivation*). Beijing: Huaxia chuban she. P. 23.

Illustration 2 Credit:

潘顺琪。'与熟人打招呼'。靳羽西。2000。*魅力何来：做一个有风度，有品位，有修养的现代人*。上海：上海文艺出版社。第79页。

Pan Shunqi. 'Greeting someone you know'. Kan, Yu-sai [Jin Yuxi]. 2000. *Meili helai: Zuo yi ge you fengdu, you pinwei, you xiuyang de xiandai ren* (*Etiquette for Modern Chinese / The Source of Beauty: Become a Poised, Refined, Cultivated Modern Person)*. Shanghai: Wen yi chuban she.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics